



# NEWS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY - INDIAN AFFAIRS

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Secretary Gale A. Norton Pays Tribute to Fallen Firefighters and Pilot in Open Letter to White Mountains Community**

**WASHINGTON** – Secretary Gale A. Norton issued an open letter to the residents of the White Mountains of Arizona today expressing her condolences to the friends and family members of those killed while battling wildfires in the region. Secretary Norton emphasized that the recent tragedies have underscored her determination to ensure that public firefighter safety be an issue of top priority within the Department.

“The recent loss of life and injuries to firefighters here, in Idaho, and in Washington State, underscore my resolve to ensure public firefighter safety remains our number one priority,” Secretary Norton said. “The legacy of safe healthy forests is one of the greatest things we can do in memory of those who have perished, those who have suffered, and finally those who have survived the recent tragic events.”

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*[Editor's Note: A copy of the letter to the residents of the White Mountains is attached.]*



THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR  
WASHINGTON

AUG 1 2003

To the Residents of the White Mountains,

I am deeply saddened by the tragic events of these past several weeks. I join with all members of the wildland firefighting community, federal, state, local, and volunteer in expressing my condolences to the friends and family of Rick Lupe, pilot Jess Pearce, and firefighter Randall Bonito. And to firefighters Kristy Johnson and Floyd Walker, my thoughts are with you and your families as you make progress in your recovery from the helicopter incident.

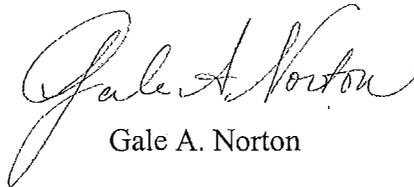
Many of you in the White Mountains have suffered devastating losses from last year's Rodeo-Chediski fire only to see a similar scenario play across public, private, and tribal lands in 2003. When wildfires cause thousands of residents to flee the comfort and safety of their homes, recovery becomes even more difficult. The emotional effects are far greater for those directly affected than by those merely watching these events unfold on the evening news. Whether directly affected or not, you who live in the beautiful White Mountains also need time for emotional recovery after seeing the forests and wild lands you love devastated by wildfire.

The recent loss of life and injuries to firefighters here, in Idaho, and in Washington State, underscore my resolve to ensure public firefighter safety remains our number one priority. This will be emphasized on the fire line and during fire management projects as part of everyone's daily duties.

I pledge to continue my efforts to implement the administration's National Fire Plan. I will continue to emphasize working with all agencies and communities to reduce the risk and devastating effects of wildland fire to property and our precious natural resources.

My greatest hope is seeing the wild lands of these beautiful White Mountains thriving as healthy ecosystems, without communities at risk, and with the threat of major wildfire reduced. The legacy of safe healthy forests is one of the greatest things we can do in memory of those who have perished, those who have suffered, and finally those who have survived the recent tragic events.

Sincerely,



Gale A. Norton